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Real Estate

Can historic development be green too?

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Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, says there are about 20,000 buildings in the state that either are listed on the National Register of Historic Places or are at least eligible for listing.

In fact, he says, Rhode Island may have the greatest concentration of historic buildings of any state. On April 14, more than 500 people gathered in Pawtucket for a day-long discussion of how protecting, restoring and reusing those properties connects with environmentalism.

The title of the 22nd annual statewide historic preservation conference was “Something Old, Something Green,” and as Sanderson put it, the purpose was “to learn more about green, then to begin to start thinking about how do we apply these new technologies and these new movements to this standing inventory of structures that we know we have to deal with in Rhode Island.”

“In Rhode Island, the question is not whether you want to deal with buildings or not,” he said in an interview, “because we have too many of them to ignore. You can’t tear them all down and start over. You’ve got to figure out some good thing to do with the buildings we’ve got, many of which are also historically and architecturally significant.”

The keynote speaker at the conference was Jean Carroon, a principal at Goody Clancy, an architectural, planning and preservation firm based in Boston. Carroon leads the firm’s preservation and renovation projects, including, in 2000, the restoration of H.H. Richardson’s Trinity Church in Boston, which was founded in 1733. She is also a member of the Mayor’s Green Building Task Force, started by Boston Mayor Thomas Menino to help the city develop environmentally friendly policies.

Carroon said talking about making a greener world is “not just about the environment.” It also incorporates the need to create a sustainable world, which includes rehabilitating existing buildings. The greenest buildings, she said, are the ones already built.



PBN PHOTO / FRANK MULLIN
GREEN DEVELOPMENT plans on display at The Grant in Pawtucket during the April 14 historic preservation conference.

But Rhode Island's large number of historic buildings also creates challenges. On one hand, those structures are already built and available. On the other hand, these same buildings could require time and money to upgrade, and some may include major contaminants such as lead paint and asbestos.

"There are problems with old buildings – there are problems with new buildings too," Sanderson said. "Some projects are more difficult than others."

Colin Kane, a principal at The Peregrine Group LLC, spoke about one of his ongoing projects, Rumford Center, a \$50 million rehabilitation and reuse of the former Rumford baking powder factory. The 8.3-acre site contains nine buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Kane said this work is not for the faint of heart, and it is a challenge to rehabilitate old properties, especially larger ones.

"When you get into these older industrial sites, you're contending with environmental issues, you're contending with physical issues - structural, the simple 'whether the building will stay up or not,' " he said. "And the process of qualifying for both state and federal historic tax credits is a very rigorous and expensive and time-consuming process."

Scott Wolf, executive director of Grow Smart Rhode Island, spoke about the importance of the state's 30-percent historic tax credit program, which has come under increasing scrutiny in the last two years due to its growing cost at a time when the state is facing a major deficit.

Wolf said the program is based on the notion that there is value in rehabbing historic buildings that benefit the economy and tourism and add to neighborhoods' characters. Many of those buildings, he said, will not be rehabbed without an incentive, which is what the tax credit provides.

Wolf noted that Rhode Island not only has more historic buildings per square mile than any other state, but also the largest collection of historic buildings per capita – most of them in urban centers and town centers. Many have fallen into disrepair and have been a drag on the economy and neighborhoods, he said, and since they're expensive to restore, the historic tax credit helps level the economic playing field between building on vacant land and renovating an old building.

"There's no question that without the tax credits, this huge inventory of vacant and deteriorating buildings is going to remain vacant and deteriorating," Sanderson concurred.

Sanderson said that before the tax credit, there was \$10 million to \$20 million per year in investment in historic buildings, while now there is \$100 million to \$200 million.

One of the conference's sessions, titled "Back to the Future: 21st-Century Growth in 19th-Century City and Town Centers," took a broader view of historic restoration, looking at the revitalization of downtown areas.

Steve Durkee, a principal at the Providence-based architectural firm Durkee, Brown, Viveiros & Werenfels, said older downtown buildings are no longer being used for what they were meant for, and it is important to repopulate the buildings for the sake of their communities.

Durkee also showed his audience some particularly egregious examples of the alternative – ugly, low-quality new construction with few windows, often built too close to the curb, all made possible, he said, by bad zoning. People sighed, groaned and laughed from one picture to the next.

“What’s really wasteful is when you see cheaply built buildings going up that nobody intends to keep for more than 10 or 20 years,” Sanderson said. “You drive around the countryside and you see these abandoned, cheap commercial buildings. They’ve spoiled the landscape, they’ve already cost the energy to build, they’re totally unproductive, and they’re not worth rehabbing.

“If we could develop a mentality where we believed in recycling, where we believed in rehabilitation, maybe we’d start building new buildings that are worth rehabilitating in the future,” he said.